

Grapes: Telefarming—Tending grapes at a distance?
(Number 44 in a series of highly opinionated articles on growing grapes and making wine in Fair Play)

I whined in an earlier column about the consequences of having land prepared for a vineyard when you can't be there, and how the large boulders seem to hide from the ripper bars on the 'dozer when you're not there to watch. Since these days everyone seems to be telecommuting and teleconsulting (not to mention telemarketing), and since some new responsibilities are going to cause me to spend more time out of the area for a while, it seems like a good time to set down the one simple rule about how you can go about farming when you have to be gone: you can't! Having participated in grapegrowing to one extent or another since 1975, I've had experience with all levels of involvement. I do more of the actual farming now than some, and less than others, but over the past fifteen years, at various average distances from our vineyard, I've gotten a pretty good education in how difficult it is to run a farming operation from far away.

Remote Control

Unlike other occupations, no one has yet figured out how to dig a weed or drive a tractor from a distance, and it's pretty unlikely that anyone will soon. All the good parts of farming (come on, there are a few, like tractor-seat therapy, bloom-time aromatherapy, and walking through the vineyard, tasting the ripening grapes to decide when to pick) rely on first-person presence for completion. When you can't be there, you have no choice but to rely on others to perform the work, and you have to be prepared to miss the enjoyable parts as well. If you're fortunate enough to have a good vineyard manager and crew (and we modestly submit that ours are the best in the entire world), it's still possible to own, if not actually operate, a vineyard. And while you will miss out on the personal participation, you'll have the added enjoyment of writing additional checks to compensate the people who are acting as your agricultural surrogates.

Cool, Clear Water

While some activities are *approximately* demanding of attention (such as pruning, much of which was completed this year after green leaves had already appeared on the canes), there are a few that demand immediate action. When the grapes get thirsty in early summer (usually June or July; maybe May this year), someone must be there to supply the necessary irrigation. Some vineyards (principally those developed by retired aerospace engineers) have automated irrigation systems with soil moisture sensors, electric valves and interval timers. Those who are fortunate enough to live where water comes out of a pipe (such as the El Dorado Irrigation District) are provided a service, called neutron probe analysis (NPA), which allows measurement of water in the ground once a week at one-foot depth intervals, then reports the total amount of water in the "root column" that feeds the vines, in order to determine irrigation needs. Most vineyards here, however, are still dependent on manual valves to provide the right amount of water, and thanks to the activism of some local grape growers, a County grant is available which pays for 50% of any NPA measurements we contract for, (even here in Fair Play) to

determine water requirements in our vineyards that are dependent on individual wells. It's only fair, since the County has an obligation to provide equal water and services for all residents, but just hasn't quite gotten around to bringing irrigation water to South County the way it has to the middle area (although they assure us on a regular basis that they are actually afixin' to commence to begin some preliminary planning for it!).

So it goes without saying that someone must be around to turn valves on and off during the 3-4 months that the vines need water. Often, the best approach is to establish a regular schedule for each irrigation block in each vineyard: block 1 gets water on Monday, block 2 on Tuesday, etc. Some people with limited water supplies have taken to irrigating for only a few hours, then rotating to a new block, but not only does this interfere with a good night's sleep, it wets only the upper foot or so of the ground. When the water stays near the surface, more of it is lost to evaporation, and worse, the vines' roots are encouraged to move up closer to the surface, where there are fewer nutrients and less protection from bugs and varmints. Watering for longer intervals but less frequently drives the moisture deeper so it encourages deeper root growth, and is preferred by most advisors.

Let Us Spray

From the time the new shoots are a few inches long until the grapes turn color in August ("veraison"), you have to protect against pests such as powdery mildew, mites and leaf hoppers. The mildew sprays need to occur on a regular schedule to be effective, and the other pests need to be addressed when they rear their ugly little heads. Sulfur is still the primary line of mildew defense (and it has been declared "organic," even though it is *kind* of like a chemical and does its job by slowly oxidizing in the air into sulfur dioxide, which is *very much* like a chemical), and it can be augmented with "systemic" materials that are absorbed into the plant tissue, generally after bloom time in June.

The other rascals are really only obvious when you spend time in the vineyard, and the irrigation valve operator or spray rig driver should always be on the lookout for insect pests and the damage they can cause.

Being Picky (if you remember this section title, you've been reading these articles too long!)

The other time you (or someone who cares as much as you) just *have* to be around is when the grapes approach maturity and will soon need to be picked. You've read my earlier harangues about how the flavor of the grapes is even more important than chemical analysis, but both have their place as harvest time approaches. The sugar content, pH and acidity are all important parameters to measure, but it takes time to tour a vineyard in order to get a representative sample. My experience is that you will spend an hour (between sampling and analyzing) for each vineyard sample, and the more particular among us will visit each vineyard two or three times. With one field of one variety, it's not bad, but if you should be foolish enough to grow, say, thirteen varieties on perhaps twenty-three acres, it can take a lot of time (and a lot of walking).

If you had the foresight to keep records from previous years of both grape ripening dates and the weather, you can make some educated guesses about when the grapes are close enough to require careful monitoring. The Kindly Editor of this journal included my article, in the last edition, on the effect of weather on grape ripening, with a graph of what happened at Oakstone in the years 2001-2003. All you have to do is make an accurate estimate of the size of the crop this year, compared with last year, compare the weather with earlier years, and you'll have some general guidelines to predict ripening times. For both this and the irrigation schedule described earlier, there is a valuable service called CIMIS (California Irrigation Management Information Service, <http://www.cimis.water.ca.gov/cimis/welcome.jsp>) which will provide statistics on temperature, wind and humidity for this and previous years, and can make your predictions a lot more accurate. They have maps showing how much water loss from evapotranspiration (you really should learn this word—it sounds *very* impressive, and can transform you in just seven syllables from an ordinary dirt farmer into a sophisticated agriculturalist) occurs in each area of the state on a page called “ETo Zones Map” you can click to from the main page above. The main purpose is to help you gauge how much water is needed, and how soon the grapes are likely to ripen.

Temporary Unretirement?

Okay, I have to admit it—I failed retirement! It's not possible to express how much I have enjoyed writing these articles for the Turnout over the last seven years, especially when people take the time to tell me they were entertained by them or even occasionally learned something! I have taken on new responsibilities which unfortunately will require me to spend much of my time actually *working* for the next two years (it's in my former field of providing better technology for people with diabetes who have to measure their blood sugar to stay healthy). If successful, the product will eventually improve the quality of life for millions of people afflicted with this disease, and will be worth the temporary sacrifice of a lifestyle I have come to love here in Fair Play. I'll still be around the neighborhood (and haunting both Oakstone and Obscurity wineries) from time to time, but not to the extent I have been since 1996. Whenever possible, I'll sneak in an article, but I have had to let The Kindly Editor know that my unbroken string of forty-four articles will have to have at least occasional interruption. You can be assured that I will continue to keep this community, as well as the community of grape growers and winemakers, fondly within my heart as I temporarily pursue this new undertaking. And you can also be sure that I will write the occasional highly opinionated article, especially when the grape prices come in each year, to remind everyone, once again: “I told you so!”

[Editor's note: When John is unable to provide an article for an edition of the PVFA Turnout, we will still be able to provide some of his highly opinionated thoughts by running some of the “classic” articles from years gone by. John has offered to update these where necessary to make sure they're relevant, and we hope you'll find them of value even after the span of a few years.]